



History of tanning in Great Ayton and the Richardson tanneries

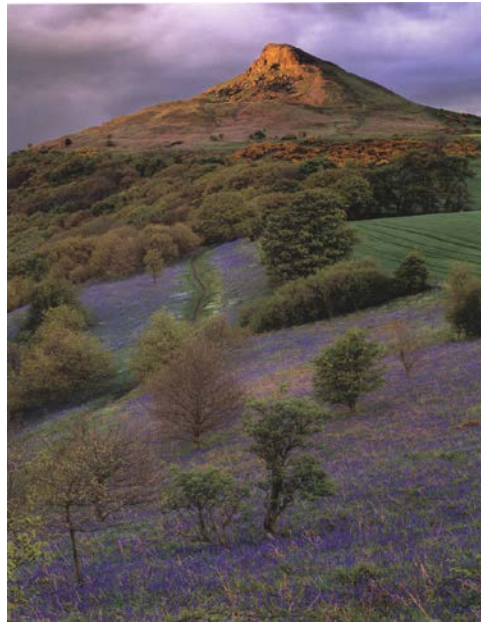
From small beginnings in the seventeenth century in Great Ayton, by the twentieth century the Richardson family owned one of the largest tanneries in the country at Newcastle upon Tyne

Leather is strong, flexible, hard-wearing and waterproof. Before the advent of synthetic materials it was widely used in footwear, clothing, fastenings and harnesses, book binding and vellum for written records.

Most parishes would produce their own leather. Tanning might be a part-time activity of farmers. Like other Cleveland villages, Great Ayton had the main requirements in abundance, plus dog faeces, pigeon droppings, urine and lime. Not a pleasant process!



Cleveland long-horn cattle



Oak bark from Newton Wood



Water from the River Leven

The traditional tanning process involved several stages and could take up to a year to complete.

- 1) Preserve skin using salt
- 2) Wash to remove the salt
- 3) Treat with urine or lime
- 4) Scrape off flesh, fat and hairs with the hide over a beam
- 5) Treat with dog or pigeon faeces, or animal brains, to break down the elastomers
- 6) Bind the collagen molecules together to prevent decomposition by soaking in progressively stronger solutions of tannic acid.
- 7) Dry, then treat with wax or oil

There have been tanners in Great Ayton for centuries, the earliest reference being from the sixteenth century. Thomas Butterwick, a tanner in Great Ayton, died in 1601 and left his will.

In the Quarter Sessions for the seventeenth century, Tanners in Great Ayton were fined for polluting the river.

The Parish Registers frequently record “tanner” as an occupation throughout the eighteenth century.

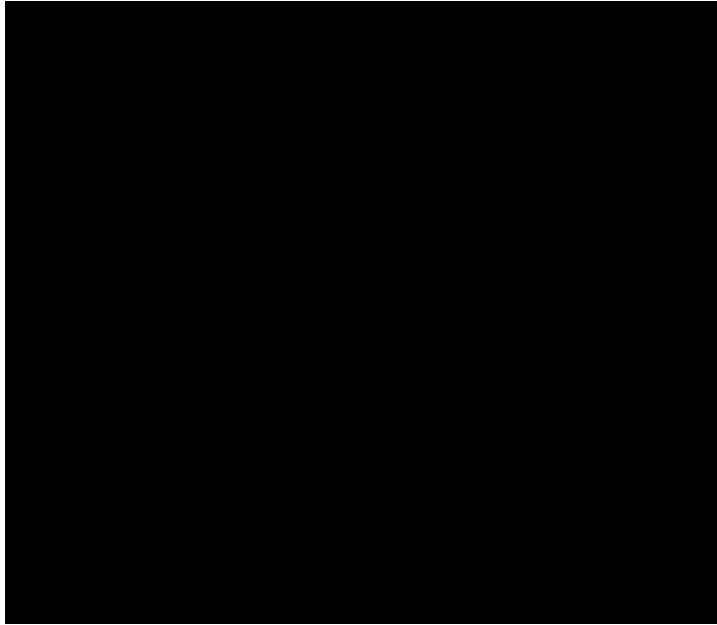
By the nineteenth century Robert Kettlewell wrote that there were:

“a number of tan yards, one belonging to the Jackson family in Yarm Back Lane, two others lying off the High Green and bordering upon the River Leven occupied by the family of Martin, another belonging to the Richardsons of Langbaurgh, situate at Langbaurgh Farm, and yet another occupied by the Yorke family.”

But, by the twentieth century:

“Portions of the buildings of these tanneries, notably the former drying sheds, still stand though put to other uses, but the tan-pits have in each instance been filled in.”

We know the location of many of Great Ayton's tanneries. We do not know the location of Yorke's tannery, but the tanner T Yorke was reported bankrupt in 1817.



Jackson's Tannery preserves the only relic of the once-flourishing industry in the village. The drying sheds can still be seen on Yarm Lane.

The last tanner here, at the end of the nineteenth century, was Jack Jackson. He had two apprentices, the Longstaffe brothers. When Thomas Longstaffe died in 1928 he was said to be the last link with Ayton's tanning industry. Jack Jackson lost much money through betting on horses. "Tanner Jackson's" ghost was said to haunt the Ayton School on the night of Halloween.



Williamson's tan-yard was by the waterfall. In the eighteenth century, it was acquired by William Richardson, second son of William and Elizabeth Richardson of Old Langbaugh. He incorporated into his large tan yard between High Green and the River Leven.

It later became Grayson's the blacksmith, who used one of the pits, filled with water, for shrinking iron tyres to wooden cart wheels.



The Cleveland Tannery was by far the largest in Great Ayton, with 92 tan pits. It was situated between High Green and the River Leven, and was owned by William Richardson (1700-1794). In his will, the tannery was left to Isaac and Rachel Martyn (1755-1834). Rachel was his grand-daughter. Their son Isaac (1788-1843), took over the tannery on his father's death. He married Elizabeth Pease.

On Isaac's death the tannery went to his unmarried sister Elizabeth Martin (1781-1867) known as Betsy. Betsy Martin "adopted" William Martin (1825-1863) born in Pilgrim Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, and in 1860 he took over the running of the tannery



Betsy Martin died in 1867 and her properties were sold. Dr Loy bought the three properties on High Green, and the village doctors' surgery continued to be housed in the building through the archway until the building of Rosehill Health Centre in the 1970s.

The large slate embedded between the whinstone setts in front of 18 High Green is believed to be a lining stone from one of the Cleveland Tannery pits.

Some idea of the size of the Cleveland Tannery can be had from this advertisement, from 1843, when Betsy Martin was trying to sell or let the business.

TO TANNERS AND CURRIERS

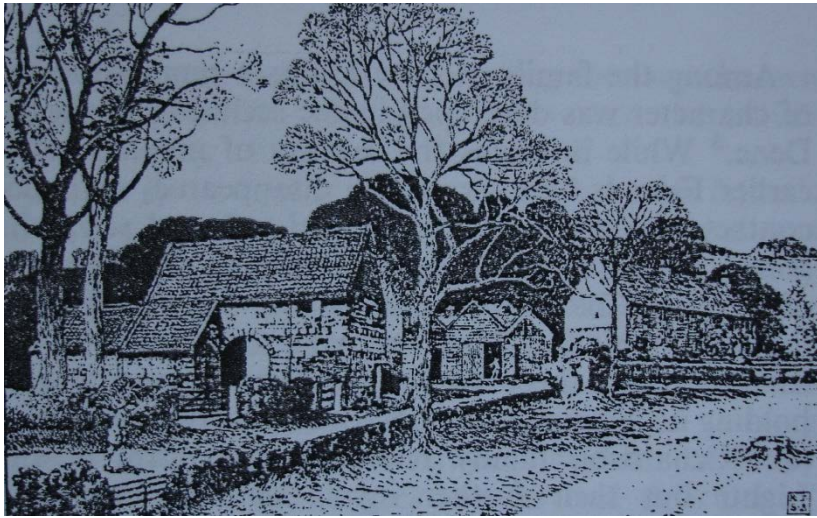
TO BE LET, at Great Ayton, near Stokesley, Yorkshire, an excellent TANYARD belonging to the late ISAAC MARTIN, of Manchester, containing 92 pits, 46 of which are under cover, with Drying Sheds, Bark Chambers, Bark Mill, and other Conveniences &c., also a Stream of Water passing through the Yard, of a superior Quality for the process of Tanning.

The above Premises are situated 10 Miles from the Seaport of Stockton upon Tees.

Also, to be Let, at a short Distance, a small TANYARD, particularly calculated for a Currier, containing 36 pits, 32 of which are under cover; and in the same Yard may be had, if required, a complete CURRIER'S SHOP, (capable of accommodating 10 or more Men at Work) with Water, Stove, and necessary Sheds, and all requisite Conveniences. Also, if wanted, a large and commodious DWELLING HOUSE, with Garden, Stabling for four Horses, Gig and Cart Houses, &c.

The above may be let separate or altogether.

For further particulars apply at No. 63, Oldham Street, Manchester, and of Elizabeth Martin, Great Ayton, near Stokesley.



The above print, from a Richardson booklet about the history of the business, shows William Richardson's tannery buildings at Old Langbaugh. The stone barn used for drying hides can be clearly seen today, from the Middlesbrough Road (above right).

The barn has been converted into a private house (right) but the large number of ventilation openings in the walls, now closed over, are evidence of its use as a drying shed rather than a threshing barn.





Isaac Richardson (1707-1780) set up a tannery in Whitby at Bog Hall, tanning hides, calf skins and seal skins from local whalers. The Richardson booklet print (above left) shows the stone building of Bog Hall and the timber drying sheds in the foreground. Today, only Bog Hall itself remains (above right). Later, Isaac moved to new tan-yard in Whitby.

Isaac Richardson had three sons, all of whom started working for their father:

John (1733-1781)

Isaac (1738-1791)

Henry (1740-1808)

Isaac then left to set up a tannery in York, and in 1758 John Richardson went to Seaton Delaval. He bought land at North Shields from fellow-Quaker John Walker of Whitby and set up a tannery there at Pew Dene in 1766.

The Low Lights tannery at Pew Dene was named after the old Low Light navigation marker, seen down by the estuary (to the left of the smoke plume in the print).

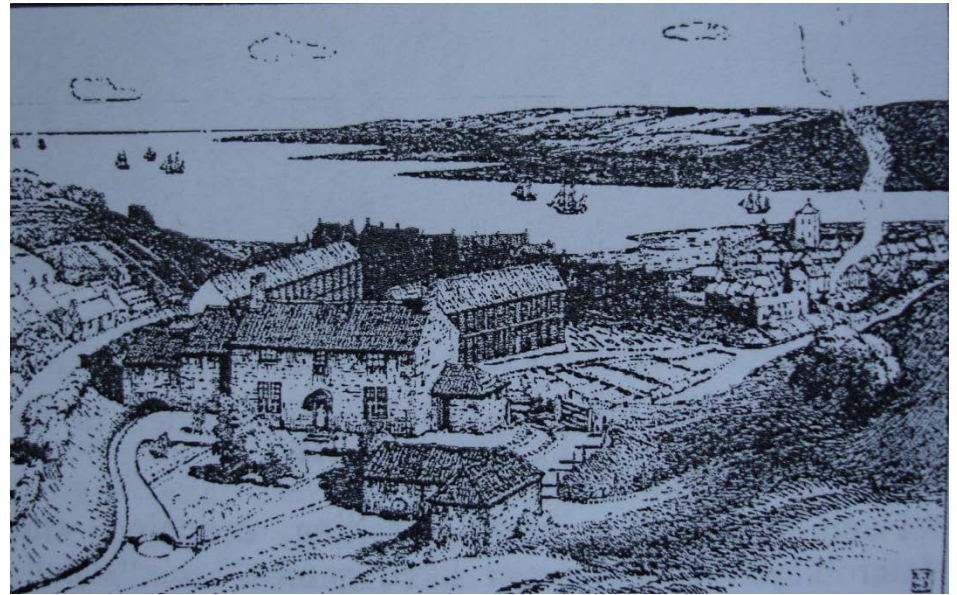
Three of John Richardson's five sons became tanners :

Isaac (1761-1810)

William (1771-1842)

Henry (1778-1834)

Today, a shellfish processing plant (lower photograph) stands on the site of the Low Lights tannery, with only the road sign as a reminder of the former industry.

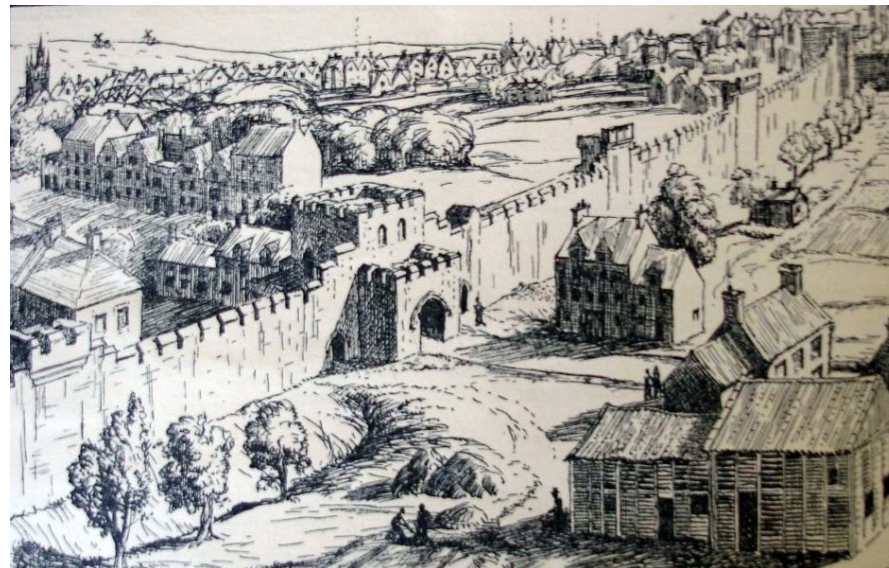


John Richardson's son William took over Low Lights tannery after his father's death, and was joined by William's younger brother. By the 1820s Henry was running the tannery.

In 1840 John Richardson Proctor joined the business; his mother was one of John Richardson's daughters and he married one of John Richardson's grand-daughters.

John Richardson Proctor intended that his son Henry Richardson Proctor (1848-1927) should take over, but Henry was more interested in research and went on to become a pioneer of the industrial leather processes based on science.

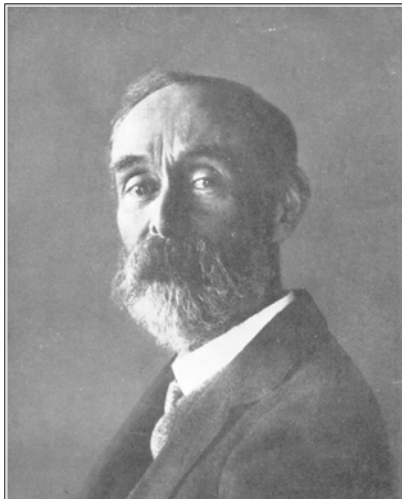
Meanwhile, John Richardson's son Isaac started a tannery in Newcastle upon Tyne (shown below) at Pilgrim Gate, in 1784, and was soon joined by his brother William.



In 1810, Isaac died at the comparatively young age of 49. His sons John and Edward were destined to take over the family business, but were only aged ten and four. So one of their Quaker cousins, John Priestman, ran the tannery until John and Edward were older.

When John Richardson died in 1859, he was succeeded by his sons James and David. In future, the business was known as E & J Richardson.

After the old Newgate tannery was destroyed by fire in 1863, David Richardson designed a new tannery at Elswick on the northern bank of the River Tyne. This would become one of the country's largest leather producers.



Henry Richardson Proctor (left) joined the new works in 1888 as an industrial chemist and developed new leather production techniques based on his scientific understanding of the tanning process.

He was invited to establish the Department of Applied Chemistry at the Yorkshire College, later the University of Leeds. His name lives on in the Proctor Food Sciences Department at the University.



David Richardson designed a large new factory on the banks of the River Tyne at Elswick. Operations were vastly different from the previous tanneries – tanning was now a modern industrial process.



However, some of the unpleasant manual tasks remained. The photograph shows the blubbing seal skins in 1891. Notice the wooden boards covering some of the soaking pits in the foreground.



This splendid poster listed the factory's products as chrome leather, shoe leather, hydraulic leather, belting, sealskin leather, fancy leather, bookbinding leather (acid free), glue and gelatine. The poster also listed the Richardson tanneries from William Richardson's tannery at Old Langbaugh: Great Ayton 1660-1740, Whitby 1732-1780, Low Lights 1766-1784, Pilgrim Gate 1784-1800, White Cross 1800-1863, Elswick Works from 1913.



By the start of the twentieth century, the directors of E & J Richardson were still Richardson family members and Quakers. Like many other great Quaker industrialists, they were paternalistic employers. They built houses for their workers, and featured them in their advertisements (see below).



EDW. & JAS. RICHARDSON, ELSDICK LEATHER WORKS, NEWCASTLE-ON-TYNE.

MAKERS OF
FOLLOWING FOR
BUILDERS, ETC.,
VIZ. :
CHROME BELTING,
OAK BELTING,
GLUE,
GELATINE,
UPHOLSTERY
LEATHERS.

*Prices and Samples on
application.*

With over-capacity in the British leather producers, and cheaper imports, the Elswick Works was bought by another leather producer, Barrow Hepburn & Gale, in 1969. Two years later, they closed the works, and it was subsequently demolished, as shown in the photograph below.



In 2007, Barrow Hepburn & Gale's last London tannery closed. However, the names of Barrow and Gale and the Richardsons survive in two different business ventures.



A small workshop in London, named Barrow and Gale, makes Ministerial Red Boxes and Maundy Purses.

In 1882, David Richardson had bought Wheelbirks Farm at Stocksfield, Northumberland, but rented it out to tenant farmers. Later generations of Richardsons took a more active interest in the farm, and today, Hugh and Tom Richardson (below left) have a successful ice-cream and restaurant business there. So instead of a business based on products from dead cows, the Richardsons now rely on live animals.





This presentation has been based on research into the Great Ayton tanning industry and the Richardson family by Ian Pearce.

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